

Soft Drinks and School-Age Children

Sample Op-Ed Piece

Taking Issue with Pop Culture

Here's a question. Given these options, will a child choose: milk, water, natural fruit juice or soda? If you said soda you are probably either a parent or work in a school. Vending machines filled with sodas and snacks are now as common in school buildings as lockers filled with textbooks. But unlike lockers, they earn their keep. Vending machines have taken on a new function in local schools - paying for thousands of dollars worth of student/administrative activities or equipment.

Right now Ashland County School District is considering a district-wide exclusive contract with Bubbling Beverages, Inc. Through exclusive contracts with soft drink suppliers, schools here and across the country are taking in thousands, and in some cases tens of thousands, of dollars in exchange for providing a captive audience to whom they market their products. There is no doubt the schools need the money. They can turn it into books, computer labs, high-tech scoreboards, field trips or proms. But, at what cost? Don't these contracts undermine our efforts to teach students to make healthier food choices?

Soda is not commonly viewed as a healthy food. USDA defines it as having "minimal nutritional value." And it may even have negative health consequences if children load up on its empty calories instead of eating nutritious meals. At a time when an alarming number of children are overweight and out of shape, the last thing they need is easy access to sodas.

Childhood overweight and obesity have become a national epidemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The percentage of young people who are overweight has more than doubled in the past 20 years. In 1999-2000, more than 10% of 2 through 5-year-olds and more than 15% of 6 through 19-year-olds were overweight. Obesity in the young is linked to type 2 diabetes, elevated blood cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, psychological stress and increased adult mortality.

Health advocates say that 20 years ago, teens drank almost twice as much milk as soda. Today the numbers are reversed. Doctors say soda has been pushing milk out of teenage diets and putting girls at risk of osteoporosis. Some in the medical community now consider osteoporosis a pediatric disease because it begins early but doesn't show up until later in life.

The two critical places to effect behavior change are at home and at school. In both places we should practice what we preach. Students should be offered a wide variety of healthful foods and beverages - both inside and outside the cafeteria.

When soda machines are all over our school campuses, kids will drink more soda. We need to put more effort into marketing milk, 100% juice or water, and see what kinds of results we get. Parents, teachers and the community must take action now. Contact your School Board members and let them know that you oppose the proposed exclusive soft drink contract. We can't let profit considerations distract us from our goal - healthy, well-educated children.

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